

# A crown of thorns

Peter Thonemann

Some time in the early 30s A.D., an obscure Jewish rebel by the name of Jesus of Nazareth was brought to trial before the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate during the Passover festival at Jerusalem. The story of his subsequent crucifixion is well known but other details in the gospels merit further attention. In this article, Peter Thonemann investigates the question of what did Jesus actually do, and why in particular was he made to wear a crown of thorns?

What Jesus was accused of remains frustratingly unclear in our sources: to begin with, the four Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – were distinctly vague on the subject. Even Pilate himself was reduced to asking the Jewish leaders ‘What accusation do you bring against this man?’ (John 18:29). But the key charge seems to have been that Jesus had set himself up as King of the Jews, an intolerable act of treason towards the Roman imperial state. Later, Jesus’ cross would carry an inscription describing him as ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews’ (John 19:19).

During Jesus’ trial, he was subjected to a very public and violent humiliation at the hands of Pilate’s soldiers. After flogging him, ‘the soldiers wove a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe; they said Hail, King of the Jews, and beat him with their hands’ (John 19:2–3). This ‘crown of thorns’ is, to put it mildly, a pretty well-known object. There probably isn’t a church anywhere in the world where it is not depicted somewhere, usually on Jesus’ head as he hangs on the cross – even though there is no good reason to think he was still wearing it when he was crucified. But the fact that an object is famous does not mean it has been properly understood, and the crown of thorns is well worth a closer look. By comparing Jesus’ crown of thorns with other crowns in Greek and Roman art, we may be able to come up with an unexpected and rather exciting new perspective on Jesus’ trial and crucifixion.

## A thorny problem

The gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial before Pilate leave it annoyingly unclear what his crown of thorns may actually have looked like. Most modern artists imagine it as a thick cluster of prickly twigs, as if it had

been woven from supple hawthorn or acacia branches. The crown is usually depicted as an instrument of torture, with the sharp thorns pressing painfully into Jesus’ forehead and drawing drops of blood. In fact, the gospel accounts provide no real support for this idea. The purple robe that the soldiers placed on Jesus’ shoulders was not intended to cause him physical pain: it was simply a way of mocking his claim to be a king (since purple robes were typical royal dress). The crown of thorns, too, is likely to have been part of the soldiers’ mockery of Jesus, rather than an instrument of torture. Most probably it was an imitation of some well-known type of royal crown, as an ironic reminder of Jesus’ ill-fated claim to be King of the Jews. And as it happens, there was a very widespread ancient form of royal headgear (not strictly a crown) that fitted the bill very well indeed.

## The original divine ruler

Alexander the Great (King of Macedon 336–323 B.C.) had been the first Greek-speaking monarch to be worshipped during his lifetime as a god. The ‘ruler-cult’ of Alexander and his successors seems very odd to us, as it did to many Greeks at the time; whether Alexander’s subjects really believed that he was divine is, in fact, a very difficult question to answer. At any rate, Greek artists had never before had to deal with the problem of depicting a living king who was simultaneously a god, and it took them a long time to settle on an appropriate iconography for new divine rulers like Alexander.

In the first years after Alexander’s death, one common strategy was to depict kings with animal horns projecting from their brows – the ram’s horns of Zeus Ammon for Alexander himself, the bull’s horns of Dionysus for Demetrius the Besieger, and so on. These horned

portraits were a way of evoking the king’s divine power, without, as it were, treading too hard on the toes of the real Olympian gods (none of whom were ever depicted with horns in Greek art). But this slightly surreal way of indicating the king’s divinity did not last long. By the mid third century B.C., horns disappeared from the Greek visual repertoire, to be replaced by a more satisfying way of indicating a king’s divinity.

## Kings and gods

In Greek art, the sun-god Helios was conventionally depicted with a halo of sharp points radiating out from his head, representing the sun’s rays. This visual motif – stylized rays emerging from one’s head – was taken over by several Graeco-Macedonian kings as a way of marking their status as gods. Alexander and his successors tended to wear a plain white band (‘diadem’) over their hair as a symbol of their kingship. From the late third century B.C. onwards, kings began to be depicted with Helios-style rays projecting upwards and outwards from their diadems, indicating that they were not just kings, but divine kings. So, for example, a spectacularly tasteless gold coin of Ptolemy III of Egypt (221–204 B.C.) depicts him wreathed in the scaly goatskin cloak (‘aegis’) of Athena, with Poseidon’s trident poking out behind his shoulder, and a diadem shooting forth solar rays perched on top of his pudgy head.

Centuries later, the use of a ‘radiate crown’ to mark a ruler’s divinity was taken over by the Roman emperors, when they too adopted the Greek practice of ruler-worship. Coins struck during the reign of Tiberius (A.D. 14–37) depict the reigning emperor on one face of the coin, his head bound with a laurel wreath, while the other face carries a portrait of the deified Augustus, wearing a radiate crown of exactly the same type as that found two centuries earlier on the coins of Ptolemy III. For both Greeks and Romans, the radiate crown served as neat visual shorthand for the twin status of their rulers, as mortal king and immortal god.

## How to mock the King of the Jews

That is not to say that people went around

wearing radiate crowns in real life, any more than Alexander the Great wore a pair of plastic ram's horns strapped to his forehead. Art can comfortably represent aspects of a ruler's nature that would be ridiculous if imitated in real life. (Roman emperors were often depicted nude, to highlight their heroic and semi-divine qualities – but they didn't actually wander around with their kit off.) The diadem with rays was largely confined to the sphere of iconography; when Julius Caesar took to wearing a *real* radiate crown in the last year of his life, it was taken as a sign of his inhuman arrogance and royal ambition.

What about Jesus' crown of thorns? Well, the most common 'thorny' plant of Judaea, in antiquity and today, was the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*). The stem of the date palm is ringed with thorns of formidable length (up to 30cm), which are so stiff and sharp as to make pruning a palm-tree a dangerous business. These long date-thorns could easily be woven into a 'crown of thorns' looking very much like those worn by Ptolemy and Augustus on the coins illustrated here. We are so used to the standard image of Jesus' crown of thorns as a bundle of spiky twigs pressing into his forehead that it requires a bit of effort for us to re-imagine it in this way. But actually this makes a lot more sense out of the relevant passages in the gospels. If Jesus' crown of thorns was not in fact meant to cause him physical pain, but was a parody of the radiate crowns worn by contemporary kings and emperors, then the soldiers' mockery would suddenly take on a new and rather nasty edge.

For one of the things that Jesus' accusers found most offensive about his teachings was the fact that he not only claimed to be King of the Jews, but that he claimed to be none other than the 'son of God' (John 19:7). Jesus' claim to royal status was bad enough; claims to divinity, however obliquely phrased ('my Father'), were truly beyond the pale. As we have seen, no divine king ever actually wore a radiate crown in real life. So, putting a fake radiate crown on Jesus' head was a neat way of deflating this pathetic rebel's outrageous claim to be a king of divine birth: the point was make him look like the charlatan in fancy-dress that both Jews and Romans believed him to be.

### Behold the man!

All this is interesting and exciting in its own right. It also serves as a lovely example of the light that a proper study of Greek and Roman art can shed on wider problems in ancient history. But perhaps most wonderful of all is the fact that we can now, at last, understand for the first time the full force of Pontius Pilate's famous words when he brought Jesus out before the multitude at Jerusalem, clothed in his

purple robe and crown of thorns. *ecce homo*, said Pilate: 'Behold the man!'

That is to say, Behold, for all his claims to kingship and divinity, this man is nothing but an ordinary human, wearing a ridiculous palm-thorn radiate crown as if he were really a king and a god. The people of Jerusalem would only have needed to pick a coin from their purse to grasp the symbolism without any difficulty.

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